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ABSTRACT

Although it has been estimated that over three-fourths of all older adults have living siblings, little information is available on the actual and potential supportive role siblings play for older persons. The sibling relationship has several unique and interesting characteristics and the intimate experiences of childhood may either bind or separate siblings. Siblings usually separate geographically and psychologically as they grow up, yet adults report strong feelings of closeness towards their brothers and sisters. And, although siblings are of little functional importance in terms of providing instrumental services to older adults, sibling relationships are characterized by the desire to help when needed. Sibling support may be instrumental in the individual's facing the problems of aging. Next to adult children, siblings offer the best prospects for providing older adults with a permanent home. While some studies have indicated that sibilings constitute an important source of social and psychological support in later life, others report that interaction with siblings is not related to the elder's level of morale or feelings of insecurity, loneliness, or usefulness. Although siblings may potentially be a supportive resource in later life, this is not always the case. The level and type of support between older siblings may depend on both the idiosyncracies of the particular sibling relationship and the developmental needs characteristic of older adults. (NB)

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Sibling relationships: An unrealized potential support for the elderly

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Whereas intergenerational and marital relationships are routinely addressed in the discussion of family issues regarding the older client, limited attention has been devoted to sibling influence. This despite the evidence that between 75% to 93% of all older adults have living siblings (Brubaker, 1985; Scott, 1983). In fact, whereas only about half of all women over the age of 65 have living husbands, six out of seven older women have a living brother or sister (Shanas, Townsend, Wedderbaum, Friis, Milhoj & Stehouwer 1968).

We have limited information as to the actual and potential supportive role siblings play for older persons. Most research has focused on the frequency of contact and the availability of kin for assistance, rather than the nature of the sibling bond. Research in this area is sorely handicapped by the lack of any clear theories of sibling influence in adulthood (Cicirelli, 1980).

Given the high proportion of older adults with living siblings and the unique characteristics of sibling relatiionships, I would argue that siblings constitute an unrealized potential support for the elderly. I will briefly review the existing literature on sibling relationships in adulthood, drawing attention to the developmental changes and special needs of older adults.

Clearly, the sibling relationship has several very unique and interesting characteristics. Potentially, it may

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have the longest duration of any human relationship experienced, possibly lasting some 80 to 90 years or more. In most cases, siblings share a common heritage and a common past. Whereas siblings are theoretically equal in status, differences in age, abilities, or favoritism may make for sharp distinctions between siblings. Indeed, the intimate contact and experiences of childhood may serve to both bind and separate brothers and sisters.

As noted by a colleague of mine (Bedford, 1986) the nature of sibling relationships can be characterized by "separation", "affiliation" and "conflict". Siblings usually separate geographically and psychologically as they grow up. However, despite the acknowledgement of rivalrous feelings, adults report strong feelings of closeness toward their brothers and sisters (Ross & Milgram, 1982; Scott, 1983; Argyle & Furnham, 1983) and although there is a negative association between age and frequency of contact (Cicirelli, 1980), the tie that binds is rarely severed completely. In fact, some research suggests that older adults feel a greater closeness towards siblings than younger adults (Scott & Roberto, 1981; Cicirelli, 1982), a finding all the more intriguing when one considers the increasing interiority accompanying advancing age which favors a lessening interest in maintaining social bonds.

In general, siblings are of little functional importance in terms of providing instrumental services to older adults (Kivett, 1985). This reflects in part, not

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having siblings residing near enough to provide regular direct assistance (Hays, 1984; Scott, 1983). When adult children are available, they are more likely to be called upon for assistance (Cicirelli, 1980). However, sibling relationships are characterized by the desire to help when needed. Siblings are generally ready to give aid in time of trouble (Cicirelli, 1980) as when important decisions need to be made, assistance when ill (Scott, 1983) and during the initial adjustment at widowhood (Brubaker, 1985; Lopata, 1973). Further, widowed, single persons and those who infrequently see their children tend to have greater contact (Shanas et al, 1968; Scott, 1983) and receive more assistance from siblings.

Some researchers suggest that sibling support may be instrumental in the individual's facing the problems of aging (Cicirelli, 1980; Cohler, 1983). As noted by Lillian Troll (1982), next to adult children, siblings are the best prospects for providing older siblings with permanent homes. Other theorists propose that sibling support may allow the older adult to maintain personal autonomy in later life (Cohler, 1983).

Given the societal stereotypes regarding the elderly and feelings of helplessness that often characterize advancing age, some older adults find it difficult to maintain personal integrity. Some researchers suggest that since siblings, for the most part, function within the framework of common family values, interaction patterns and

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perceptions of reality, siblings may be uniquely suited to validate each others' perceptions of self and the world around them (Ross & Milgram, 1982).

However, the little research available with regards to the importance of siblings for the elder's psychosocial adjustment, is inconsistent. Whereas some studies indicate that siblings constitute an important source of social and psychological support in later life (Ross & Milgram, 1982; Cicirelli, 1980). Other researchers report that interaction with siblings is not related to the elder's level of morale (Scott, 1983) feelings of insecurity, lonliness, nor usefulness (Simons, 1983-1984).

Thus it appears that although siblings may potentially be a supportive resource in later life, this is not always the case. Possibly explanations include both the idiosyncracies of the particular sibling relationship and the developmental needs characteristic of older adults.

For example, whereas critical life events, such as the death of a spouse or sibling generally bring siblings closer together (Ross & Milgram, 1982; Troll, Miller & Atchley, 1979), for previously conflicted relationships, these same life events tend to generate more negative reactions between siblings (Ross & Milgram, 1982).

It is also the case that support may be experienced negatively (Ward, 1985). Support may be a demoralizing reminder of one's reduced competence particularly if it is given by a younger or envied sibling. Further, it can be

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psychologically stressful to deal with a disliked or difficult sibling whose efforts are interpreted as meddling rather than supportive.

I would also like to point out the need to appreciate the perspective of a prospective sibling caregiver. With the increasing interiority of later life, the sibling may have little patience with the necessity of caring for others. Further, acknowledging the dependency needs of others can be stressful, particularly at this stage of life when developmentally, the individual needs more time for herself.

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